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ABSTRACT

It is important for teachers and students to develop a broad understanding of Japanese education. Americans who are knowledgeable about teaching and learning in Japan gain insights about a different culture, and are better able to think clearly about our own educational system. This digest examines (1) Japanese educational achievements; (2) the structure and curriculum of K-12 Japanese education; (3) Japanese higher education; (4) adult education in Japan; and (5) problems and future prospects for Japanese education. (Contains 12 references.) (DB)

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Japanese Education

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JAPAN DIGEST

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Japanese Education

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It is important for teachers and students to develop a broad understanding of Japanese education. Americans who are knowledgeable of teaching and learning in Japan gain insights about a different culture, and are better able to think clearly about our own educational system. This digest examines 1) Japanese educational achievements, 2) the structure and curriculum of K-12 Japanese education, 3) Japanese higher education, 4) adult education in Japan, and 5) problems and future prospects for Japanese education.

Japanese Educational Achievements. Japan's greatest educational achievement is the high quality basic education that virtually all young people receive by the time they complete high school. In international mathematics tests, Japanese elementary and secondary students rank either number one in the world, or near the top year after year. Japan ranks among world leaders in literacy rates, which is particularly impressive since the Japanese language is one of the most difficult languages in the world to read and write. Over 90 percent of Japanese youth graduate from high school. The Japanese also learn more in their formal educations than simply literacy and numeracy. Music and art, particularly in elementary school, are more important parts of the Japanese curriculum than is the case in much of the United States. What Japanese learn in school is used throughout adult life. Japanese are avid readers. Almost as many books are published annually in Japan as in the United States, which has twice Japan's population. Japanese rank second only to Swedes in per capita newspaper consumption. Japanese employees of large companies are the most well-educated work force on earth.

Japanese K-12 Education. Even though the Japanese adopted the American 6-3-3 model during the occupation, elementary and secondary education is much more centralized in Japan than in the United States. Control over curriculum rests largely with the national Ministry of Education. Kindergartens are funded by municipalities and private sources, but the national government pays for about 30 percent of elementary and junior high education in Japan. Well over 95 percent of students during these first nine years of compulsory education attend public schools. The percentage of national government support for high school education shrinks to only about two percent of total costs as prefectures and municipalities are responsible for funding. The private sector is an important factor in secondary schools as almost 25 percent of Japanese youngsters attend private high schools.

There are important differences in Japanese and American teachers and administrators. Although Japanese teachers are less likely to have advanced degrees than their American counterparts, high salaries and prestige levels make teaching a more popular profession in Japan than the United States. The typical Japanese school usually has only two administrators: a principal and a head teacher.

All Japanese elementary and secondary school students attend school 240 days a year, although the national government has just initiated a program to slightly reduce annual days in school. While the Japanese curriculum is actually quite similar in many respects to the curricula of American elementary and secondary schools, there are some important differences. Mathematics and Japanese language are given great attention in Japanese schools. Virtually every Japanese student takes English from the seventh grade through the final year of high school. Most American public high schools are comprehensive. The majority of Japanese students who plan to attend university attend academic high schools, while their peers who have other plans attend commercial or industrial high schools. The major difference in Japan and the United States in the process by which students are admitted to junior and senior high schools. In the United States, students enter secondary schools based on either school district assignment or personal choice. In Japan, most students are admitted to both junior and senior high school based upon entrance examination performance. The best Japanese junior and senior high schools require high examination scores for entry. Japanese universities also require entrance examinations. Since top Japanese employers base hiring decisions almost entirely on the prestige level of the university one attended, ambitious students attend private cram schools and study long hours, particularly during the last year of high school. The futures of most Japanese high students depend largely upon the high school to which they are admitted and how well university-bound students do on college entrance examinations.

Japanese Higher Education. Japan's colleges and universities are generally considered to be the weakest

component of the nation's educational system. Institutions of higher education in Japan tend to be more difficult to enter than American colleges. However, for a variety of reasons Japanese universities are relatively easy places from which to graduate. Universities are generally considered by students and, to a certain extent the larger society, to be four year vacations. Most Japanese university students are far more interested in the opposite sex, university clubs, and travel than in their studies. Japanese universities also offer far less developed graduate education programs than nations of similar or less wealth.

Education in the Workplace and for Personal Growth. Large Japanese companies and government ministries are famous for the superb education and training they provide employees. A major reason for this is that the average Japanese worker is much less likely to change jobs as many times in his or her career as employees in the West. Japanese employers and employees have a strong incentive to spend a significant amount of time in the teaching and learning process, as the entire enterprise will benefit from better educated workers. Most education and training in these large institutions takes place within the Japanese firm or ministry. Two major kinds of workplace education are job rotation, which both white and blue collar workers experience, and the deliberate practice by management of disseminating information in the form of reports, papers, and work-related periodical articles to all employees. Large Japanese enterprises make great use of Quality Control Circles, where blue collar workers in the same section meet on a regular basis to discuss how to perform their tasks more efficiently. QCC's serve a major educational function for blue collar workers as information is constantly acquired through the discussion circle process. Adults in Japan also continue to learn for personal growth. Not only is reading a major adult activity, but almost all adult Japanese pride themselves in having hobbies that they cultivate for life. Many of these hobbies such as the mastery of a musical instrument or the study of conversational English involve the acquisition of new information. Women and the elderly are especially interested in learning for personal development. In recent years, cultural centers and so called "old peoples" universities have become quite popular in Japan. Both institutions offer a variety of courses for adults.

Problems and the Future of Education in Japan. Despite serious efforts by Prime Minister Nakasone to reform education in the 1980's, the examination system and the mediocre quality of Japanese universities are still serious problems today. Although some high schools and universities are attempting to examine other criteria than examination scores when making admission decisions, the overemphasis upon examinations means factual material is too often accentuated in the Japanese classroom at the expense of broader and deeper understanding of subject matter. Traditionally, Japanese universities have not only been uninspiring places, but institutions that are only open to students between the ages of 18 and 24 or 25. Since the 1980's, many Japanese policy makers have recognized that adult learners as well as young people must have access to university education. Currently, many Japanese universities are both expanding the options for adult learners and beginning graduate programs. The emphasis upon internationalization that began in the late 1980's is another encouraging development in Japanese higher education. More and more foreign students are now studying in Japan and large numbers of Japanese students are venturing abroad for part of their university studies. However, an overemphasis upon entrance examinations at the secondary and university levels remains the great unresolved problem in Japanese education as the nation approaches the 21st century.

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